

Dear Members of the Education Committee,

My name is M.J. Chironna and I have been a Norwalk resident and parent of three daughters for over 26 years. I am also the Manager of Community Engagement at Norwalk ACTS. I'd like to thank you for the opportunity to testify in strong support of H.B. 5283.

I am testifying in support of this bill because we need to ensure that all Connecticut students have access to the resources necessary to support their specific learning needs in order to thrive in the classroom and beyond. Of Norwalk's almost 12,000 students, 74% identify as students of color (BIPOC), and according to the State Department of Education, Norwalk allocates \$19,770 per pupil spending, while 68% of our students are identified as high needs. In addition, due to Norwalk's Property Wealth Factor in the ECS Equation and unlike many of the urban school districts in Connecticut, 85% of our education budget is paid for by local property taxes NOT state funds.

In comparison to our neighboring towns, such as Wilton and Darien, they allocate over \$22,000 per pupil spending and roughly 20% of their student population are high needs. These figures show the disproportionality between the number of students in need, and the dollars the students receive depending on the school system. The only difference between students in neighboring towns receiving more funds, and students in Norwalk, is their zip code.

One of the best parts of this bill is to move all funding formulas to weighted student funding, aligning with ECS. This has a positive direct impact on choice programs, specifically Open Choice. I am very proud to be a graduate of the Simsbury Public School District that was one of the first of five towns in Connecticut to embrace Project Concern (now known as Open Choice) in 1966. In Simsbury, the school district recognizes that school diversity and integration benefit students, preparing them to enter an increasingly diverse workforce. Through the Open Choice program, Simsbury children meet students who have different life experiences, and students from all socioeconomic backgrounds build relationships and gain perspective through classroom discussions and after school activities. Simsbury has continued to embrace Open Choice and has increased the number of Open Choice opportunities for children over the past 50 years. By passing this bill, I truly hope more suburban school districts provide Open Choice opportunities to children living in urban towns. This not only helps with providing a high quality academic education but also reduces racial, ethnic and economic isolation providing all children with a choice of high-quality educational programs.

As a white privileged woman, I have had the opportunity to choose the public schools my children attend. My husband and I chose the Norwalk Public School District which has very different student demographics than Simsbury. Educating our children is not just about academics but also instilling in them skills and values to work with all different types of people. I believe we are all responsible for educating every child and young person from cradle to career.

I am grateful that this bill recognizes the need to create a more equitable Connecticut, both racially and socio-economically, and will take steps to bring us closer to that reality. Though this bill alone will not completely close the racial funding gap, it does put our state on the right path by beginning the conversation. Thank you for your time today and I urge you to support this bill, accelerate the ECS roll out and finally fully fund ECS once and for all.

Sincerely,

MJ Chironna, MSW
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